Instigative aggression as a function of past experience.

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Abstract:

Third-party-instigated aggression was examined by manipulating the provocativeness of the same or a new target in Part 2 of a task. Effects of previous experience with aggression (i.e., interacting with partners supportive of or disapproving of aggression in Part 1) were also examined. Although the provocativeness of the target accounted for the most variance in the amount of aggression expressed, when the target in Part 2 was new, prior experience influenced aggression. Results are discussed in terms of an interactional model of behavior. The clearer the current situational demands (i.e., known, predictable target) were, the less the influence of past aggressive experience on continued aggression; the more ambiguous the current situation (i.e., new, unpredictable target) was, the more the influence of past aggressive experience on continued aggression.

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Article:

Although aggressive interactions are typically depicted as involving victims (targets) and attackers (instigators), many situations involving an aggressive encounter are situationally more complex. One factor that often contributes to the complexity of the situation is the presence of others (Borden, 1975). In the context of an aggressive exchange, observers are not always neutral. They may prefer one party to be victorious over the other. They may also directly or indirectly contribute to the outcome by playing the role of an advisor or a legitimizing source for the aggressive action (Gaebelein, 1973; Richardson, Bernstein, & Taylor, 1979).

Sometimes the course of a confrontation changes, and third parties to the aggressive exchange take the role of a combative participant. For example, a third-party instigator, defined as one who directs or initiates an aggressive exchange between two others but does not get involved in the actual altercation (Gaebelein, 1973), may later find him- or herself face-to-face with the victim (target) or may encounter a new target shortly after the initial aggressive situation. When this

change in role from passive to active participant occurs, how does the third party act? Is he or she more, less, or as aggressive toward an opponent now that he or she is in a position to inflict direct aggression?

As an analog to the transition from indirect to direct participant in an aggressive exchange, Mander and Gaebelein (1977) created third-party involvement by having subjects initially assume the role of an advisor to one of two participants (actually a confederate) competing in a reaction time task. Aggressive action was introduced in the form of suggesting which intensity of electric shock should be delivered to the subject's partner's opponent should the opponent lose the trial. In a later session, subjects became active participants in the same competitive task. Research with this paradigm suggests that subjects tend to be influenced by the context of their interaction with their partners in the initial aggressive exchange.

Mander and Gaebelein (1977) reported that subjects who had interacted with a pacifist partner (i.e., one who refused to set high shocks) subsequently showed a marked increase in the amount of aggression directed toward the same provocative target when given the opportunity. These authors con eluded that although the subjects had temporarily suppressed the amount of aggression directed toward the target (i.e., suggested that only low-shock intensities be set) due to the subordinate's social pressure to be nonaggressive, there did not appear to be any adoption of a pacifist norm on the part of the advisors. Gaebelein (1978) later demonstrated that the subsequent expression of aggression in the Mander and Gaebelein study probably was not a result of merely a frustration of the aggressive drive. She found that subjects with noncooperative subordinates did not aggress excessively against a new, nonprovocative target when given the opportunity. She went on to conclude that the

> advisors do not vent their frustration or anger aroused by a disobedient subordinate against an innocent victim; apparently, when the target of an advisor remains the same, aggression increases when the social pressure is removed, but when the target is a new person, undeserving of attack, the pacificism seems to generalize, (p. 303)

These studies, in line with a cognitive social learning perspective, suggest that the nature of the past experience with instigative aggression should interact with the perception of the opponent's behavior to affect aggressive behavior. That is, based on past experience with the situation, cues that encourage or elicit aggressive behavior will be more salient and hence more likely to have a mediating effect on the instigation of aggression. In Rotter's (1954) terms, subjects would have developed a generalized expectancy for aggression. However, rather than predict a simple linear increase in aggressive behavior as a function of recent past experience as a target or observer of aggressive action (see Taylor, Shuntich, & Greenberg, 1979), situational or contextual cues are likely to mediate and predict aggressive behavior. In Rotter's terms, a specific expectancy would also exist.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine the influence of past aggressive experience on subsequent aggressive behavior. Subjects were involved initially in a reaction time task as advisors to partners who were either supportive (i.e., a cooperative partner who tacitly approved of aggression) or critical (i.e., a partner who explicitly disapproved of aggression) of using aggressive counterresponses (bogus electric shocks). Subjects were later placed in a situation in which they could make direct aggressive responses. The consequences of either the initial positive or negative experience with aggression for different types of victims (familiar or unfamiliar, provocative or nonprovocative) were also examined. Hence, the interaction of a generalized expectancy (i.e., past experience) with a specific expectancy (i.e., current situation) could be examined.

In Gaebelein (1978) a new, nonprovocative target did not "suffer" because her attacker had had a prior positive experience with aggression, whereas in the Mander and Gaebelein (1977) study the aggression directed toward a same, provocative target was influenced by the attacker's prior experience. However, the aggression-eliciting power of a new, provocative target relative to a same, nonprovocative target (who was previously provocative) has not been examined to date; thus, it is not clear from the data of previous studies what the relative contributions of provocation and familiarity with the target are to the relationships observed. Therefore, an additional purpose of the present study was to assess the variance accounted for by these two factors.

Two types of responses were of particular interest: subjects' initial aggressive response on Trial 1 of Part 2, and their subsequent aggressive reactions to the opponent's provocation. A behavioral interpretation would predict that the cooperative experience (i.e., partner endorsing aggressive responding) would result in more aggression for these subjects on Trial 1 of Part 2 than for subjects with the noncooperative partner; a social learning interpretation would not necessarily make such predictions. Rather, this approach would suggest that since the situation has changed, subjects may take a "wait and see" stance, that is, no differences on Trial 1. Regarding subsequent responding, a behavioral perspective would predict a strong carry-over effect due to past experience, that is, one would assume that generalized expectancies would take precedence over specific expectancies. On the other hand, the social learning perspective would argue that the current cues, if not ambiguous, would be stronger than the past experience, although they may interact with past experience. Based on previous aggression research, it was predicted that provocation would account for a greater proportion of the variance in the data than past experience and/ or type of opponent.

Method

Subjects

Eighty female students volunteered from a subject pool at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Participation could serve as partial fulfillment of course requirements for undergraduate classes in introductory psychology.

Apparatus

The apparatus (described by Gaebelein, 1973) included a responder's task board equipped with (a) three, lights: two white lights labeled "set" and "press," respectively, and an amber light labeled "release;" (b) a reaction time key; (c) five red feedback lights labeled from 1 to 5, and one white light labeled "lose" (these lights conveyed the outcome of each experimental trial); (d) five shock-setting buttons numbered consecutively from 1 to 5.

Procedure

Two persons, the subject and a female confederate, were brought into the experimental room and told that they would be competing in a reaction time task with two other female subjects situated in another room. At this point subjects were informed that the study involved electric shock and were given the option to withdraw. One subject withdrew from the experiment because of an unwillingness to deliver shock to others.

If the subject agreed to continue, the experimenter explained that one subject of each pair would be a "responder" and the other an "advisor." A drawing was held to randomly determine the role that each participant would play. Actually the procedure was rigged so that the real subject always acted as advisor and the confederate as responder. The confederate was seated in front of the task board, and an inoperative shock electrode was connected to the palmar side of her left wrist. The subject was seated adjacent to the responder; then, using a modified method of limits, the responder's "unpleasantness" threshold for shock was determined. The responder did not actually receive shock but only acted as though she did; the shock level she reported as "definitely unpleasant" was considered the "maximum" shock intensity that could be delivered.

The experimental session was divided into two parts. During the first part the subject acted as an advisor, that is, suggested shock levels for the responder to set. During Part 2 the subject became more directly involved in the aggressive interaction by virtue of the Tact that she was instructed to set the shock buttons herself and to compete in the reaction time task, The subject was also told that she would not receive any shock and that her reaction time data were being collected as control data.

Each trial in the task involved four events: (a) The set light flashed, at which time the subject suggested to the responder the shock level to set for the opponent should she lose on the coming trial, After the advisor suggested a shock setting, the responder pressed one of five shock buttons, (b) The press light flashed, at which time the responder depressed the reaction time key. (c) The release light flashed, and the responder removed her finger from the reaction time key as fast as possible, (d) One of the five feedback lights flashed, indicating which shock level the

opponent had ostensibly set for the responder. Subjects were told that the Number 5 shock was equal to the shock the responder judged most unpleasant during the threshold procedure and that the other shocks were percentages of this. If the trial was predetermined to be a lose trial, the lose light flashed, and the responder feigned a shock of the intensity set by the opponent.

Experimental Design

The experimental design was a mixed design with cooperation, provocation, and type of opponent as between- subject factors, and trial blocks and win-lose as within-subject variables.

Cooperation. Half of the subjects in the experiment were randomly paired with a cooperative partner and the other half with a noncooperative partner. Cooperative confederates set the advised shock level on each trial. Noncooperative (nonaggressive)1 confederates set the suggested shock levels only when the recommended settings were 1s and 2s. If the subject advised a shock of 3 or greater, the confederate stated, "I don't believe in shocking people" and set a 1 or a 2 (confederates were trained to randomly set an equal number of Is and 2s). To keep verbal interaction in the noncooperative groups to a minimum, the noncooperative confederates, when instructed by the subject (advisor) to set a shock above 2, repeated that they did not believe in hurting anyone and set a 1 or 2 level of shock.

Type of opponent. During Part 2, half of the subjects were assigned to the same condition. These subjects were told that they would be competing against the advisor of the opponent-responder from Part 1. The other half of the subjects were assigned to the different condition and were told that an advisor who had participated in the experiment a week earlier had been asked to come back and would be their opponent during the second part of the experiment.

Increasing provocation (trial blocks). This within-subjects variable was defined as the feedback subjects received regarding the level of shock set by the opponent. During each trial block (composed of six trials), the opponent's mean shock setting increased by 1 shock level during Part 1 of the experiment. Part 1 was composed of four trial blocks. During Trial Block 1 the opponent set three Number 1 shocks and three Number 2 shocks (in random order), yielding a mean shock level of 1.5 for Trial Block 1. The mean shock settings for Trial Blocks 2, 3, and 4 were 2.5, 3.5, and 4.5, respectively.

Part 2 of the experiment was composed of three trial blocks. In Part 2, half of the subjects continued to receive provocative feedback (opponent was setting shock levels 4 and 5) and half of the subjects received nonprovocative feedback (opponents set Is and 2s).

Win-lose. Within each trial block, responders won three trials and lost three. The particular order of winning and losing was randomly determined.

Results

Figure and Table 1 are omitted from this formatted document.

For the purpose of data analysis, three dependent variables were identified: mean shock settings suggested during each trial block of Part 1; actual shock level set on Trial *I of* Part 2; and mean actual shock set during each trial block of Part 2. The analysis of the mean shock suggested by subjects during Part 1 of the study confirmed previous results. Both cooperation, $F(l, 72) = 28.97, p < .001$, [//(utility index) = 10.92%, and trial blocks, $F(3, 216) = 51.74, p < .001$, *UI:s* = 12.99%, as well as the Cooperation X Trial Blocks interaction, $F(3, 216) = 11.79, p < .001$, *UI* = 2.77%, were significant. At each trial block, Scheffe means comparisons revealed that subjects with cooperative partners suggested significantly higher shock (Ms = 2.12, 2.30, 2.83, and 3.19) than did subjects with noncooperative (nonaggressive) partners (Ms = 1.80, 1.84, 2.04, and 2.17). Furthermore, for subjects in the cooperative condition, all blocks except 1 and 2 were significantly different; whereas for subjects in the noncooperative condition, only Trial Block 4 was greater than 1 and 2. These effects are evident in Part 1 of Figure 1.

To examine the effects of the experimental manipulations in the second part of the study, two analyses were performed. First, an analysis of Trial 1 responses was performed. This analysis revealed that neither past experience with a cooperative or noncooperative partner (Ms = 1.81 and 1.60, respectively) nor status of opponent, same or new (Ms = 1.62 and 1.79, respectively), produced significant differences.

The means for Part 2 are portrayed graphically in Figure 1. The analysis of these data indicated a significant effect for provocation, F(l, 72) = 16.43, $p < .001$, *UI* - 12.55%. The Cooperation X Type of Opponent, $F(l, 72) = 3.80$, *UI* = 2.28%; Cooperation X Opponent X Trial Blocks, F(2, 144) = 2.84, *UI.*, = .41%; and Opponent X Provocation X Win-Lose, $F(l, 72) = 2.80$, *UI,,* = .22%,interactions were all significant *at* $p < .10$. Scheffe tests of means were performed on these interactions, with $a = .05$. The Cooperation X Opponent interaction was due to the cooperation new opponent condition (M = 2.77) eliciting more aggression than the others, which did not differ significantly (cooperation same, M = 2.16; noncooperation same, M - 2.23; noncooperation new, M = 2.03). The Cooperation X Opponent X Trial Block interaction revealed the following response patterns (the means are presented in Table 1): First, only the cooperation new condition elicited an increased level of aggression over time, with Trial Block 2 being greater than Trial Block 1, although not different from Trial Block 3. Also, at each trial block the new opponent was the target of more aggression than the same opponent but only for subjects who had had cooperative partners; subjects with noncooperative partners did not show this effect. Finally, the cooperation-noncooperation effect was significant at each trial block, with cooperation resulting in more aggression than noncooperation for the new opponent only. When the opponent was the same in Part 1 and Part 2, a difference due to the cooperation-noncooperation manipulation did not emerge. The Opponent X Provocation X Win-Lose interaction was evident in that after a lose trial, the new opponent received more intense shock (M = 3.00) than the same opponent (M = 2.49). Also, losing (M = 1.99) produced more aggression than winning (M = 1.80) for only the same nonprovocative opponent.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, data from Part 1 of the present study showed that provocative targets were the object of more aggression than nonprovocative targets. Also consistent with previous findings, when the confederate responders (Part 1) were cooperative, subjects suggested increasingly greater shocks and an overall greater intensity of shock than when the confederate responders were noncooperative and nonaggressive (Gaebelein, 1973; Richardson et al., 1979).

In examining the data from Part 2 (both Trial 1 responses and mean shock settings across trial blocks), it was quite clear that prior history alone was not sufficient to predict subsequent aggressive behavior. As a matter of fact, cooperation-noncooperation was not even a significant source of variance in Part 2 of the study, although in Part 1 of the present study and in other investigations of third-party instigated aggression, it has been a very powerful variable. Rather, the degree of aggression expressed was also modulated by the current conditions; in the present study the critical factor appeared to be the target. When the target was the same in Part 1 and Part 2, whether the subjects had previously experienced cooperation or noncooperation did not matter. Only when the target was new did prior experience with using high or low shocks make a difference. This suggests that subjects who had expectations concerning both the continuing behavior of the same target and the likelihood that they could control the target chose shock intensities accordingly. If the target continued to be provocative, subjects counterattacked by setting high levels of shock; if the target became nonaggressive, subjects also adopted a nonaggressive pattern. On the other hand, subjects who could not predict or control the behavior of the new target, relied more heavily on their own past behavior in deciding on an appropriate course of action. Subjects with history of using higher shocks continued to use higher shocks; those who had used only the lower shocks continued with low shocks. This explanation suggests that the less predictable a situation, the more likely one's past behavior will predict behavior in the current situation. If the current situation provides clear cues concerning appropriate actions, then there is less likelihood that past performance will be an accurate predictor. This interpretation supports an interactional model of behavior that suggests that one's past history interacts with current situational cues in determining behavior (Endler & Magnusson, 1976) and influencing one's expectancies (Mischel, 1973). It also suggests that specific expectancies may take precedence over generalized expectancies, at least under the conditions given in the present study.

A second purpose of the present study was to look at the relative contribution of the same-new and provocative-nonprovocative target characteristics. The results of this study strongly indicate that the provocativeness of the target accounted for a substantial percentage of variance in the data; whether the target in the subsequent situation was the same or new was relatively unimportant; her behavior was more important.

In conclusion, at least two classes of explanations have been posited to explain the effects of prior exposure to aggression on subsequent aggressive behavior. One relies on a behavioral interpretation that emphasizes the role of actual behavioral rehearsal and reinforcement. For example, Patterson, Littman, and Bricker (1967) observed in a field study that passive children

who successfully stopped their own victimization through counterattack were subsequently more aggressive than children whose counteraggression was not successful. More recently, Taylor, et al.'s (1979) first study showed that exposure to attack and experience with aggressive behavior resulted in more subsequent aggression in the experimental group than in the nonattacked control group.

Another class of explanations is cognitive in nature and relies on concepts such as modeling, observation, and attribution (Bandura, 1973; Mischel, 1973). As Bandura noted, "Reduction of inhibitions does not mean that observers will attack people indiscriminately. . . . Nor does the appearance of aggressive behavior as a result of restraint reduction imply that a formerly bridled urge to attack is set free.. . . When inhibitions are reduced, behavior is more subject to cognitively mediated control" (p. 129). For example, Geen (1981) demonstrated that exposure to film violence produced a desensitization to aggression-inhibiting cues, but whether aggressive behavior increased or decreased depended on whether subjects regarded the violence as justified or nonjustified. Geen's results supported the notion that past exposure to violence interacts with the current context to affect aggressive responding. Other studies similarly support the idea that neither the present situation nor past experience alone can predict aggressive behavior. Information and/or expectations about potential targets are critical (Gaebelein, 1978; Gaebelein & Mander, 1978; O'Leary & Dengerink, 1973; Taylor et al., 1979).

Taken together these studies form a data base from which one can argue that past exposure to and/or behavioral involvement in aggression does not automatically increase the probability of subsequent aggression. It is more likely that the context of the current situation, that is, the individual's interpretation, mediates the presence and intensity of aggression. In the present study the cooperative partner had a disinhibitory effect on subjects' aggressive tendencies, which carried over to the subsequent situation when it was ambiguous (i.e., an unfamiliar opponent who was also provocative). The provocation provided the justification for the disinhibited aggressive tendency to be actualized as overt behavior. "When people respond approvingly or even indifferently to the actions of assailants, they convey the impression that aggression is not only acceptable but expected in similar situations" (Bandura, 1973, p. 129).

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Notes

1 The reader is asked to note that the noncooperative confederate was noncooperative only with regard to setting high levels of shock. If told to set a low-level shock, she cooperated.